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Collier, John

The crisis of democracy

[Chicago]

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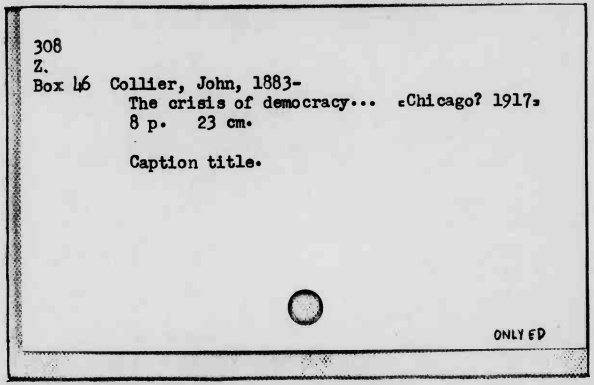

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THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY

[A speech by JOHN COLLIER, President of the National Community Center Conference, Chicago, Ill., April 17, 1917.]

308
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Pam 46

When we speak of a crisis we all think of one thing, and that is the world situation, the cyclone that is blowing civilization to pieces, as it seems, though that may not prove to be the case. We know that this crisis was precipitated by a nation which had developed efficiency, which had developed the efficiency of social as well as of material organization, to the point where that nation had become the world's social laboratory. The present crisis, the present catastrophe, was precipitated by the most efficient and probably the most educated of nations, not efficient only from the standpoint of the production and distribution of material wealth, but efficient from the standpoint of the organization of men and the organization of states of mind so that all men would carry out the collective purpose. That is the nation which precipitated the crisis in which we are, which precipitated the greatest catastrophe that has ever descended on the planet. The crisis of democracy is this, if I may generalize, that this highly efficient nation was not so efficient that it had developed a cherishing disposition toward those values which make life worth living among free peoples; and that it attacked the free peoples of the world; and that those free peoples, in order to maintain their freedom ,in order to maintain the values of civilization which have been hammered out through the slow labor and dreams of centuries and ages, that these peoples, these democratic nations, are now being compelled to emulate their adversary, are now being compelled to adopt schemes of organization which are like the schemes of organization that made Germany efficient. So that France and England and Italy and Russia and now America are undergoing a revolution in the direction of integration, in the direction of specialized organization and federalization and the extension of state compulsion, and it is necessary in order to meet the race competition which has been precipitated by the most efficiently organized nation on the globe.

Now we come to the question, What is the crisis of democracy? The question is not whether we and France and England

and the other nations can organize efficiently. That question might have been asked in August, 1914; that question need not be asked to-day. It has been answered. There is no danger that what the free nations represent will go under through conquest. Quite another question is this: Can the free nations organize on the German model or organize efficiently in some equivalent manner to the end that they may hold their own, and still remain democracies? That is the crisis of democracy, that is the question that is staring every lover of liberty in the face to-day—Can we have efficiency on the large, national scale, and still have that democracy which is represented in the words, "The Kingdom of Heaven lies within," that democracy which is represented in the freedom of initiative of the individual citizen and the small local group, that democracy which is represented in the liberty of making mistakes and paying for them, which is the most cherished gift that civilization has given to man. That is the crisis of democracy.

Reference has been made to the folk organizations of China and Russia, and the contrast is very interesting. That Russia has had a revolution and China has had a revolution need not signify anything to-day. Russia has had a revolution just now precisely because Russia was an incompetent autocracy, an incompetent and corrupt autocracy, and China has had a revolution because China was an unorganized, amorphous, unconscious nation. The conditions of the world precipitated a revolution, but the mere fact of a revolution is not significant. There have been a thousand revolutions before these. The significant fact is this, that there is no danger at all that Russia will retrograde into tyranny. There is no danger, if her folk organization can be conserved, that China will progress into tyranny. The reasons are essentially the existence of a tissue of local life, a tissue nourished deep in the unconsciousness of the people, a tissue nourished in tradition and forgotten memories, a folk life where small groups of people, holding together, co-operating not for a day nor a year, but for centuries in a continuous way, have created a society built of small groups; and in the case of Russia at least we are now witnessing the process whereby this small group organization of the Artel and the Mir is being taken over and molded into a national organization. In other words, these community centers,

thousands of years old, are to-day being taken and welded into the organization of Russia along modern lines, and the modern Russia, Imperial Russia, the Russia which will fight great wars, and not only military wars, the Russia which will blossom in the twentieth century as the most glorious of all the flowers of national life—the roots of that Russia will be living roots growing out of a folk life, a local community life comparable in fairly close detail to the town meetings and to the community centers of rural communities in America to-day. That is a very stupendous thing, and it has not been done in the world before. America hasn't done it. We are now attempting to regenerate what we have lost. Russia is the only nation which has carried over the primitive democratic forms right up into the intense modern day, and the statesmen of Russia, such men as Milyukov and Lvoff, are steadfast proponents of the community center idea.

Now we, on our part, are of course facing a more difficult problem than is being faced in Russia. Russia is facing a difficult problem because of the immediate pressure of war. If there were not the immediate pressure of war the mere lifting of impracticable bureaucratic restraints would result in a tremendous invigoration of Russian life. Russia's peril is only a circumstantial peril incident to the fact that she may be smashed by Germany this year. If she survives, her spiritual future is assured. In America we are differently situated, because in America we have a more conglomerate society than even the conglomerate Russian society, with this important difference, that complicated as is the folk life of Russia, I mean by that numerous as are the ethnic strains and the dialects of Russia, at least they have "stayed put," as it were, for long periods in one place. The movement of population is very slow in Russia. The population is still ninety per cent peasant, and things happen slowly. With us, populations many times more complex have been shot into the nation within twenty years. Great masses of the Slavic and of the Italian have been thrown into Cleveland, Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Chicago. All is seething. Labor migrates continually. As we heard Dr. Graham Taylor say last December: "I go to Europe, I remain away one year, I come back and two-thirds of my neighbors are strangers to me; only one-third of my old friends remain, the others are gone." Constant movement, constant breaking up of whatever

we succeed in constructing. What does that mean? It means that in the main there is no use in constructing anything in an isolated way, that in America there is no use in building the most perfect human institution if it is going to be located only in one place, because the flux of population goes on and individuals are merely touched for a few months or a few years, and as a rule, only a few members of a given family, and they go on, and the good that is wrought in an institution is lost, because social good is not transmitted by individuals but by groups. It is only the community that keeps alive and transmits a social tradition good or bad. The social tradition is broken when the population moves away from the good institution.

What does this mean? It means this, that we have in America, in order to work effectively at all toward the regeneration of local democracy, to work all over America at the same time. It will have to be just as in the case of the Roman Catholic, who, when he goes from one city to another, goes to the parish priest who represents the church and is his friend, as the Free Mason goes, that even so shall the community center people as they go from place to place go also from community center to community center. That means that our community centers must approximate one another in their type of organization and in their ideals and in their customs. In no other way can the community center or the social settlement or any enterprise cope with the enormous mass problem of the peoples of America who migrate from place to place and who are so heterogeneous.

The community center is applicable in city and country alike, and owing to the existence of public schools and of the interest in public education all over the nation it can be instituted all over the United States at once, it can be distributed throughout all the nation, can become a living force in every neighborhood, even as the day elementary school is to-day. Not until now has that been possible. The social settlement, perfect as it may be, is still, in America, numbered by scores; the churches reach only strata of the population; nothing else potentially reaches all the people except the community center.

I want to indicate as simply as I can where the community center appears to stand related to the American democratic problem. We do not want only to create a sentiment of good fellowship among people—we do want that—but we have been and are aiming at something more basic than mere fellowship, something more basic than mere amusement, no matter how perfect, how well guarded that amusement be. I take it that we can go back to the question of why it was that Germany, perfecting herself as a social organization, correspondingly dehumanized herself. I would like to ask you to think over how the American government functions and how social services, public and private, are carried on in America; whether there is not the same tendency in this country to develop our efficiency by standards of factory efficiency, to develop it to points of higher and higher perfection, our methods being based essentially on the analogy of machine industry, and to do it on the assumption that we human beings, that the material that we are dealing with through our ministrations, is passive material, like iron ore or cotton thread, which can be taken and put in a machine and hammered or woven and put through specialized processes and turned out at the end a finished product. Unconsciously we have modeled our governmental efficiency on the efficiency which has characterized the nineteenth century, which is the efficient production of wealth, of goods; and of course goods have no memories, no hopes, no rights, no souls.

Take the American city, analyze the social services, analyze those humane services of a city which, like New York, has one hundred municipal welfare divisions and bureaus, each with its own highly-paid head. See those highly complicated welfare activities threading their way amid the people, see the unconsciousness of the people as they are being operated upon by truant officer, by employment agent, by protective devices of one kind or another and correctional devices and health devices; see their unconsciousness as they are being touched here and touched there by these highly efficient and highly specialized ministrations of government, and see if the picture of the people as being mere passive material doesn't hold good. The people are not conscious of what government is aiming at. The people can't be conscious so long as they are merely touched here and touched there, having their teeth mended, their families rehabilitated, and so on through the list of social services. Under those conditions we are creating a state of affairs where an efficient government is gradually drifting further and further from the intelligent affection of its people.

I can only state broadly and suggestively that the development of our centralized welfare work in government and private social service is being carried out on the machine pattern, and that we must discover some way by which to bring all these purposes of government to bear on the personality of the common man, which means all of us. We must discover some way to enlist a passionate and continuous personal response from the individual so that he will, as he alone can do, shape himself through co-operating in the social purpose.

Now the object of the community center, the deep underlying object, is not merely to create through mass meetings public opinion on anything under the sun or to call officials to account for their misdeeds at meetings of voters whose indifference does not entitle them to hear the story. The purpose of the community center is to bring the mass of the people into day-by-day working relations with the constructive operations of the government, with the expert of government, with the expert of social service, so that they will co-operate with the government in its work, and, in the course of time, so that the expert will become the willing servant of the organized people, the people organized in neighborhood groups. That puts the community center into a tremendously important relation with the whole problem of government.

This is not a new idea. Even Germany woke up, although too late. In Germany from 1912 on there was proceeding a methodical decentralization of the work of German cities. They were creating local welfare bureaus. I don't mean to imply that those welfare bureaus were community centers, those little replicas of the German municipality that were being planned in every sizable group of population and municipal area. They were not community centers for the very simple reason that the free assemblage and free initiative of the people was not invited or permitted, but they were the indispensable mechanisms around which an effective democracy might have organized itself.

We in America are getting our people together in small groups, and now our people are going to reach out and ask the expert in his far-away bureau, whether at Washington or at the State Capitol or in the City Hall, to come down and live with us and consult with us and use us and serve us, and that is the community center.

The question is not whether we are going to become an efficient nation, whether we are going to gain the whole world; the only question is, are we going to lose our own souls? The answer is that we inevitably are going to lose our own souls if we do not create some kind of institution in which ordinary people can take a continuous interest, through which they can, day by day, make their contribution to the serious purposes of the state and of the collective whole, through which their personality can become infused with those great ideals which alone make a great nation. There is no people which will not passionately serve that public cause which is simple and urgent, but it must be simple, and it must need them. Surely this world war must have taught us that. The acid test has been applied to all the peoples of Europe, and not one has failed to respond. In no single warring group has there been anything except extravagant heroism, extravagant endurance, extravagant patience. It makes no difference what we think about the rights or wrongs of the case—every warring people may be deluded—but to them, each one, the issue is simple, the issue is clear, it is urgent. They are called, and it is human nature, under those conditions, to respond, and under those conditions men become gods. Our problem is to make good in the great eternal war of peace, that war through which man is groping forward into the unknown; the groping that will go on after this armed war is over, this armed war which is a mere episode of yesterday, as it will be even in our lifetime. The great war against nature, the great war against unorganized human nature, will go on. That war has no end, and our problem is to mobilize for that war the same kind of passion, the same kind of self-sacrifice, the same kind of godliness that we can witness to-day in any of the warring countries of Europe without exception.

Among pieces of work which embody the point of view stated in the foregoing address, the following may be named:

Industrial and agricultural co-operative societies, details of whose work can be learned from the Co-operative League of America and the National Agricultural Organization Society.

Health District Number One, organized under the hand of Dr. Simon Tannenbaum of New York.

Community Centers like the Harrison Technical High School of Chicago, and the Wingate Community Center in New York. Public schools like the Porter School at Kirkesville, Missouri, and the Francis Scott Key School at Locust Point in Baltimore.

The Community Clearing House in New York City is a fundamental and exhaustively planned effort to embody the point of view given in this address. The investigations of the Committee on Unadjusted Children, which have led to the institution of the Community Clearing House, have largely given rise to the ideas which are here expressed.

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